

Trump's Authoritarian Playbook to Destroy Democracy in 2025

Take Him at His Word!

<https://www.authoritarianplaybook2025.org/>

One year from now the next president of the United States will be inaugurated, and that person may very well be former president Donald Trump.

Recently, Trump was asked if he would [“abuse power as retribution against anybody”](#) if re-elected president in 2024.

The question came from a friendly source, Fox News host Sean Hannity. Hannity appeared to hope that Trump would reject the notion ahead of the Iowa caucus.



That proved to be difficult for Trump. Distancing himself from his earlier comments would mean denying the central promise of his campaign, which Trump launched by declaring to his voters:

“I am your retribution.”

Trump chose to mock Hannity's question. “This guy, he says, ‘You’re not going to be a dictator are you?’” Trump replied:

‘No, no, no, no — other than Day 1.’

We’re closing the border. And we’re drilling, drilling, drilling. After that, I’m not a dictator.”

The audience laughed, humored by the way Trump played with the word “dictator,” as if he had never previously displayed any indication of acting like one. CNN's Manu Raju [asked](#) Republicans on Capitol Hill for their reactions to the comment. They, too, dismissed it as a joke, saying things such as:

- ***“It’s entertainment. And, you know, we’ve been around him long enough. It’s entertaining.”*** — Texas Rep. Michael McCaul
- ***“I think it was a joke.”*** — South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham
- ***“We all know Trump uses unique expressions when he explains things.”***
— Kentucky Rep. James Comer
- ***“Trump’s superpower is that he’s the most quick-witted leader in a generation. Every grown man hyperventilating about this clip needs to find a sense of humor.”***
-- [Senator J.D. Vance](#)

These reactions might be understandable if Trump had not already established a record of employing authoritarian tactics during his first term. Or, if there was no credible reporting by publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Washington Post* documenting the ambitions that Trump and his allies harbor of consolidating power to seek vengeance on their adversaries come 2025. But GOP lawmakers, like many others in elite political circles, have declined to take the threat seriously.

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The Wall Street Journal editorial board [wrote](#) in December 2023: “We think American institutions are strong enough to contain whatever designs Mr. Trump has to abuse presidential power,” while suggesting that the real “danger” that could come from a second Trump administration is that he would “set up the left for huge gains in 2026 and 2028.”

Others have adopted a fatalistic “both sides” approach to the looming crisis. As one writer at *National Review* [asked](#): “[I]f our existing checks and balances under the Constitution aren’t strong enough to stop abuses of power by Trump ... why would you think that they’re strong enough to stop abuses of power by Joe Biden or anyone else?”

Ex-CNN anchor Chris Cuomo, who covered Trump extensively in his former job, [said](#) that even though Trump made “life hard for my family,” he was open to voting for him in 2024 because “We survived a Trump administration. Would we survive another one? Yes. Yes...I don’t think there’s any greater risk to America with him than with Biden.”

Democratic-turned-Independent former Senator Joe Lieberman, a prominent booster of efforts by No Labels to recruit a third-party 2024 presidential candidate, has a similar take. “This is such a strong country and our laws are so strong,” [he told *Intelligencer*](#). “Trump lost 60 cases and he had to accept the final judgment of the courts. Well, he didn’t accept it, but Congress came back from recess and got it done.”

One has to ask, why does the belief, whether genuine or performative, persist that if Trump regains power, somehow, his authoritarianism will be contained? How can his references to dictatorship be construed as humor at this point? Why do so many people still refuse to take Trump at his word?

This failure is particularly striking given not only Trump’s track record but how wrong similarly dismissive statements have proven to be in the past.

After repeated refusals by Trump to assure Americans that he would accept the results of the 2020 election led to concerns he might resist the transfer of power, *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat famously wrote a column entitled “[There Will be no Trump Coup](#),” in which he addressed directly the question of “whether [Trump] will leave power like a normal president or attempt some wild resistance.” Douthat assured us it was the former: “Our weak, ranting, infected-by-Covid chief executive is not plotting a coup,” Douthat insisted, three months before Trump dispatched a violent mob to storm the Capitol, leaving five dead, halting the congressional process of counting electoral votes, and threatening the peaceful transfer of power.

And Douthat was not alone. Roughly two months before the 2020 election, Protect Democracy’s Executive Director asked the chief of staff to a senior Republican senator to assess, on a scale of 1 to 10, how concerned he and the senator were about potential disruptions to the regular electoral process. “Zero,” he replied, saying they were “not worried at all.” A recently retired Republican senator offered a similar assessment.

Assessments of how seriously to take Trump’s seemingly outlandish statements during his 2016 campaign were similarly wrong. Trump [issued a statement](#) “calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” on December 7, 2015. At the time, his

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Republican primary rival, former Florida Governor [Jeb Bush posted on Twitter](#) that, “Donald Trump is unhinged. His ‘policy’ proposals are not serious.”

Tech entrepreneur and major political donor Peter Thiel defended and downplayed the promise. “I think a lot of voters who vote for Trump take Trump seriously but not literally, so when they hear things like the Muslim comment or the wall comment their question is not, ‘Are you going to build a wall like the Great Wall of China?’ or, you know, ‘How exactly are you going to enforce these tests?’” [he said](#). “What they hear is we’re going to have a saner, more sensible immigration policy.”

But of course, Trump was absolutely serious and signed [Executive Order 13769](#) during the first week of his presidency. Referred to by Trump himself as his promised “Muslim ban,” EO 13769 directed the Department of Homeland Security to, among other things, shut down entry to the United States by travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries.

Overcoming a Failure of Imagination

Time and again, predictions that Trump was not serious have proved disastrously incorrect. And yet pundits and officials, mainly on the political right, continue to make them, having failed to internalize lessons from these past errors.

Why is this? David Frum [has suggested](#) in *The Atlantic* that it stems from an ordinary human failure: “For all its marvelous creativity, the human imagination often fails when turned to the future,” Frum wrote. “When Donald Trump is the subject, imagination falters further. Trump operates so far outside the normal bounds of human behavior — never mind normal political behavior — that it is difficult to accept what he may actually do, even when he declares his intentions openly.”

This report attempts to help overcome that failure of imagination, from which we all suffer to some degree. In this report, Protect Democracy adds to the respectable body of reporting regarding the stakes of the 2024 election by explaining *how* a second Trump administration will go about consolidating power at the federal policy level in service of an agenda of retribution.

This report examines Trump’s campaign promises, which are no less ominous after campaign officials tried to [temper](#) them. It focuses on a set of pledges most central to an authoritarian agenda. For each category, the report explains how these promises are being translated into concrete action plans that will become federal government policy, should he take office. Protect Democracy’s legal and policy experts have carefully evaluated these plans and explain in the following pages how Trump and his allies are laying the groundwork to overcome factors that constrained him, to varying degrees, in his first presidency. We lay out the legal, policy, and bureaucratic mechanics of *how* these policies will be rolled out through the White House and various federal agencies.

In focusing on Trump’s plans to implement his agenda of retribution through federal policy and programs, this report does not cover all aspects of the authoritarian threat come 2025. For example, it does not cover potential dangers to U.S. national security from Trump’s foreign policy plans. Likewise, it does not address the complete set of extremist domestic policy plans.

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Nor does it address the dangers posed by Trump's give-and-take with white supremacist militia groups, the way his autocratic approach has been echoed by like-minded politicians at the state level, or the extent to which his rhetoric incites political violence. Additionally, in describing from a legal and policy perspective *how* Trump will use federal powers to disassemble our democracy, it does not portray all of the ways these abuses of power will harm the everyday lives of the American people. The report makes clear that the heart of Trump's agenda is not to address particular policy challenges or advance public policy goals; it is to aggrandize the executive branch's powers and use them for retribution.

Following the Authoritarian Playbook

Our analysis builds on the foundation of Protect Democracy's Authoritarian Playbook, which offers expert advice for understanding [authoritarian threats as distinct from politics-as-usual](#). The Authoritarian Playbook outlines the seven tactics used by strongmen to gain and retain power and describes examples, foreign and domestic. As that report describes, modern aspiring autocrats around the globe have developed strategies and alliances to seize and wield power. Trump's core plans for a second term would employ each of these playbook tactics:

- Politicizing independent institutions
- Aggrandizing the power of the executive
- Spreading disinformation
- Quashing dissent
- Targeting marginalized communities
- Corrupting elections
- Stoking violence.

Since rising to power in 2016, Trump and his allies have not only followed the global authoritarian playbook — they've also aggressively sought to ingratiate themselves with an international authoritarian network. Parallels between Trump and strongmen abroad show how autocratic promises can become a reality.

Trump's [overt praise](#) of autocrats, calling Russia's Vladimir Putin, China's Xi Jinping, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan "tough" and "strong," is a distinct departure from the American tradition. Although he initially talked tough about North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Trump later showered him with flattery: "[We fell in love](#)," he said.

Trump, [the authoritarian movement that backs him](#), and Hungary's Viktor Orbán are forming an especially strident international autocratic alliance. And, Orbán provides a particularly worrying data point about a would-be autocrat returning to power.

Orbán governed Hungary from 1998–2002 through a center-right coalition, then left office and was out of power until 2010. Since returning to power, Orbán has ruled as an autocrat. He [wrested control](#) over the independent media, [put the country's universities and cultural institutions under his authority](#), used demonizing [rhetoric to justify his immigration crackdowns](#), and leveraged his electoral wins to rewrite his country's constitution to keep himself in power. In a marked departure from Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, who shunned Orbán, Trump welcomed him to the Oval Office in 2019 and lavished him with compliments. "I know

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he's a tough man but he's a respected man," [Trump said](#) during their shared remarks to the press. "Probably, like me, a little bit controversial, but that's OK. That's OK."

A Roadmap of What Follows

As the following pages describe, the dangers of Trump returning to power are severe. The report focuses on the following areas where Trump has made campaign promises for how he will govern if in power.

It begins with his pledge to issue pardons for the January 6th insurrectionists and others who ignore the law or commit violence on his behalf — a move that seeks to place him and his allies outside the constraints of the law.

In Section Two, it then turns to how he will pierce the independence of the Department of Justice to direct it to investigate and prosecute perceived critics or opponents.

His weaponization of the powers of government may begin with the criminal justice system, but it won't end there. A third section examines how he will politicize regulatory agencies using their many administrative tools (licenses, permits, contracts, regulatory waivers) to force loyalty and quash dissent.

The report then turns to more direct uses of government force. Section Four addresses Trump's plans for using Department of Homeland Security agents as a domestic police force.

Section Five considers his plans to deploy not just federal law enforcement but the U.S. military here in the United States.

Section Six considers Trump's repeated suggestions that — like other autocrats around the world — he might not leave office when a second term is up.

Each section begins with Trump's promises and situates them within The Authoritarian Playbook. It then explains in detail the legal and policy mechanisms that Trump will deploy to fulfill his promises. This includes assessing the strengths and vulnerabilities in the guardrails that could constrain the particular abuses of power. Each section then describes how these plans will likely play out in the world when implemented.

The final portions of this report turn from what Trump has planned to how a pro-democracy coalition can work together to enable our democracy to withstand and overcome the threat. To succeed, we must learn from what has worked before, so this includes an analysis of what strategies worked successfully to combat authoritarianism during Trump's first term, while recognizing that continued Trump-led assaults have left our democratic guardrails battered.

The report concludes with a set of ten recommendations that the pro-democracy coalition should pursue to mitigate the threat of an autocrat in the Oval Office. As grave as the danger is, ultimately, a broad and united majority of the American public, working with our Constitution and laws, can preserve our democracy.